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Melissa Rappaport Schifman

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GO GREEN GUIDE: Building for the Future

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My road to working in the world of sustainability has been long and circuitous — as many of ours has been. The word “sustainability” was not one most of us grew up with — before we became more acutely aware of how our patterns of extraction, use, and disposal are harming the earth’s ability to supply us with clean air, clean water, and nutritious food.

Even defining the problem in this way is fairly new. I find that many people I talk to about my work do not really have the lens of sustainability on their radar.

I come at the topic from a business and public policy background. Early in my career, I handled energy and environmental policy issues in Washington D.C.. I went on to earn my masters degree in public policy from the University of Chicago, which at the time did not even have an environmental policy concentration — the administration considered it a “passing fad.”

After also earning a Masters of Business Administration, I worked in finance for the airline industry, conducting cost/benefit analyses for large capital investments. As I climbed the corporate ladder, I knew something was missing in the way businesses view themselves.

I left my last corporate job in 2003. I made a commitment to myself to devote the rest of my career to sustainability in whatever way that would play out.

I worked part time for a solar installer, invested in wind energy, and educated myself on “sustainable” or “green” materials and technologies.

A decade ago, when my daughters were still in diapers, we had the opportunity to build a new home. I wanted to make the home as sustainable as it could be: long lasting, with low energy bills.

I also wanted a healthy home. On average, people



Photo Sarah Whiting. Melissa Rappaport Schifman is the Founder of Green Intention LLC, the Editor and Sustainability Thought Leader at Rise, and the author of “Building a Sustainable Home: Practical Green Design Choices for Your Health, Wealth and Soul” (Skyhorse Publishing, 2018).

Resources

- “Prescriptions for a Healthy House,” by Paula Baker-Laporte
- “Homes that Heal (and Those That Don’t): How Your Home Could Be Harming Your Family’s Health,” by Athena Thompson
- “Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature,” by Janine M. Benyus
- “Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash,” by Elizabeth Royte
- “Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants,” by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- Reduce your home’s energy with a Home Energy Squad
visit: homeenergysquad.xcelenergy.com
- Learn about LEED for Homes:

11th of Every Month
6:30-7:30 p.m.
1890 Randolph Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55105

Peace Prayer

All are welcome!

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in the United States spend 90 percent of our time indoors. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that indoor air quality can be three to five times worse than the outdoors. While we had not intended to build new, unfortunately, the older home that we had purchased was so wet and moldy, I could not go into the basement without having an asthma attack. We needed to start over.

I read through all of the healthy home and green building guides available at the time. I had heard about LEED certification — a new green building rating system — and was intrigued. Could we LEED certify our home? What are the costs and benefits?

I pored through the LEED reference manual, making sure our building and design team knew my aspirations.

There are five components of all LEED rating systems: energy, water, landscaping, materials and waste, and indoor air quality.

I thought about why we were doing this. I came to the conclusion that there are three reasons to go green: for our health, for our wealth, and for our soul — to do better for our planet, and to feel good about that. Beyond the basic choices around functionality and beauty, these values drive our choices.

When it came time to certify our house, I started a blog. I set up a calendar for myself to tackle each of the 80 something LEED credits, one per day. I wrote about what was required, if we earned the point or not, if it cost more to earn it, or if it was frankly not worth doing.

Those blog posts were the seedlings of a book. That book, and my life, is based around those three values: health, wealth, and soul. One could argue that wealth is not a value, it is just a means of living, but for better or worse, people are motivated by money.

What's important to our health in a new or remodeled home? Clean water, clean air, and clean materials.

What affects our wealth, other than resale value? Lower ongoing operating expenses: investing in energy efficiency, water usage, and durability pays off.

What nourishes our soul? Location, landscaping, and materials — both on the front end of purchasing materials, and on the back end of waste and disposal. All have a longer-term impact on our collective health and wealth.

After we built our home, and I took our own home through LEED Gold certification, I became a LEED Accredited Professional. I spent the next five years consulting for businesses, certifying over 2 million square feet of LEED commercial space, writing corporate sustainability reports, and conducting carbon footprint analyses.

I have returned to the way we build our homes, because I believe that's where change begins — at the personal level.

We are living in a transformative time. Advances in technology — accessible high speed internet, in particular — have brought us into an information age unlike anything we have ever experienced. Fueled by social media and public interest organizations, manufacturers are being asked to become transparent with their ingredients and materials, and to disclose their operational processes.

The idea that consumers can “vote with their wallets” has never been more achievable.

I do believe that people can live in harmony with nature. To do so, we need to transform our homes and economy.

new.usgbc.org/cert-guide/homes

• Learn how to turn a home improvement project into a sustainable one:

buildwithrise.com

• Help change public policy: fresh-energy.org

• Learn about healthy home grant programs with Sustainable Resources Center: src-mn.org/healthy-homes

• Use local, environmentally friendly products for your home, such as with Moss Envy: mossenvy.com

• Find an online retailer, such as Green Building Supply: greenbuildingsupply.com

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